DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 189 132 TM 800 298

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TITLE Improving Title I Technical Assistance: An Evaluation Utilization Perspective.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (64th, Boston, MA, April 7-11, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education: *Evaluation Needs: Program Evaluation: *Research Utilization: *School Districts: Summative Evaluation: *Technical Assistance: Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I: Evaluation Problems: Title I Evaluation and Reporting System

ABSTRACT

How can Title I evaluations be improved so that they are more likely to increase the impact of evaluation data on informed actions within the schools? An examination of evaluation practice leads to the conclusion that most LEA practitioners view Title I evaluation as externally imposed and primarily designed to serve state and federal needs. A broader conception of evaluation utilization should focus on the actions and involvements of individual evaluators interacting with designated users. Based on this conception, technical assistance efforts should focus on evaluation as a process. The attainment of greater utilization of evaluation is dependent upon changes in the Title I evaluation which would allow increased local determination of evaluation questions of concern. (Author/CTM)

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IMPROVING TITLE I TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: AN EVALUATION UTILIZATION PERSPECTIVE

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Boston, Massachusetts: April, 1980.

TM 800298

Improving Title I Technical Assistance: An Evaluation Utilization Perspective

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Evaluation utilization is one of those areas which has assumed increasing importance in directing evaluation improvements. This is particularly true in Title I evaluations, in which the TIERS reporting system is intended to provide heightened evaluation utilization at several different governmental levels, (local, state, federal). Further evidence of this attention to evaluation utilization in Title I is to be found in the new "user oriented evaluation workshop materials" currently under development, and having as their focus the increased utilization of evaluation findings. However, shouldn't we explore the research on evaluation utilization before settling on "utilization" as an appropriate guiding mechanism? If we do, we will find that the literature presents a dizzying array of both claims and counter-claims about the extent and nature of utilization which on the face of it would hardly seem to provide much advice either for the conduct of Title I evaluation or as to the nature of appropriate technical assistance on the conduct of evaluations.

Evaluation Utilization Research: Restricted Definition

What do we know about evaluation utilization -- particularly at the local school level? For purposes of this discussion, I will first restrict my attention to issues pertaining to utilization of discrete evaluation findings such as an evaluation final report or end-of-year Test results. This kind of definition seems to be in keeping with the nature of the current Title I requirements. My own early research on

evaluation utilization assumed this kind of restricted definition of utilization. My students and I conducted a study of evaluation and decision making in Title VII programs in local school districts (Alkin, Kosecoff, Fitz-Gibbon, and Seligman; 1974). We did not find strong evidence that the summative evaluation findings had much impact upon local decision making. This was not a particularly surprising finding since it squared with the refrain apparent in the essays which permeated the evaluation literature at that time. The study however, did provide some research validation of the lack of utilization of report findings at the local school level.

What other evidence presents itself from research on utilization? In preparing this paper, I began to search through my notes and papers for appropriate sources to be cited, and again came across the Jane David research report (1978) on the local uses of Title I evaluations. I must admit that since it had been perhaps a year since I had read it last, I had forgotten how well taken and clearly presented the findings were. Stated quite simply, local school respondents in the David study viewed Title I evaluation requirements as "a set of procedures to provide one's superiors information on which to judge the program on the basis of criteria defined by those superiors." Hence, the respondents viewed evaluation as "more likely to be associated with accountability than to be regarded as a potential source of useful information" (David; 1978, VII).

In schools, Title I evaluation data is viewed as a set of data requirements, externally imposed from the federal and state levels. And, the typical practitioner's response is to simply fulfill the minimum letter of the law related to those requirements as expeditiously as possible. This kind of response was present in the evaluation reports of many

districts and was confirmed in the results of my Title VII study (Alkin, et al.; 1974).

Local Schools as Utilizers

Perhaps it is appropriate to step back and view education at the local level in order to more fully understand why schools and school districts don't utilize evaluation reports and test data to a greater extent. Karl Weick (1976) has referred to local education organizations as "loosely coupled systems." Namely, they do not always function in what seems to be a highly systematic and co-ordinated way. A description by Farrar, DeSanctis, and Cohen (1979) perhaps captures best the dilemma of external programs implemented in local school systems.

> The organization of federal programs in local settings does not seem like a precision drill-team marching in order toward formal goals, or even orderly bi-lateral negotiation. Instead, it seems more like a large lawn party: all the guests are likely to have somewhat different ideas about what, if anything, they want the party to be, and what they want to get from it. Often, in fact, they don't know what they want until they arrive or leave -- and sometimes they never know.

And, to pursue the analogy, suppose the host at this garden party should insist that each of the guests periodically rate the quality of the party, or the drinks, or the food etc. -- it can't really be expected to have much impact. This somewhat peculiar, externally imposed requirement will be tolerated as part of the "price of admission", so to speak, but it won't really change the behavior of individuals.

It seems to me that attempting to increase the utilization of externally determined evaluation information is entirely the wrong approach. Thus, formulating the problem as "how can we increase the use of Title I evaluation data?" may in fact confuse the issue. I do not believe that we ought to seek to increase the utilization of Title I evaluations. Instead,

I want to see evaluations improved so that they are more likely to be used, and thereby increase the impact of evaluation data on informed actions within the schools.

An example comes readily to mind. Recently, a federal funding agency called on me to review a proposal for increasing the use of information available from a statewide data bank. The proposers emphasized the enormous range of data available, the meticulous manner in which it had been collected, and the kinds of analysis which had been, or might be, performed. "But," they moaned, "hardly anyone uses the data bank." Government agencies statewide simply were not making "adequate use" of this resource. What could be done to increase use? More needed to be done, they said, to persuade state and local officials to use the evaluation data available. Something had to be done about packaging the data so that it would be more easily understood by the people in the field. More importantly, they had to learn what one could do with the available information. The data bank would be more widely used, said the proposers, if we run workshops throughout the state, and develop other procedures to make information more readily available and understood. In essence, they hypothesized that evaluation information was not used because potential users did not fully understand its relevance and importance.

Alternatively, I hypothesized that the evaluation information might not have been used because it wasn't relevant to the needs of governmental agencies. Therefore, adopting the data bankers point of view and "educating those conscientious but simple folk in the field" would not necessarily increase use. Rather, it might be hypothesized that evaluation use would increase only when the data bank provides information that is more highly

desired and which has greater perceived relevance to potential state, county, and local users. The moral? : While the easiest strategy is to call for increased dissemination and training activities, the surest step is to assess the potential utilization deficiencies in the evaluation system itself.

Evaluation Utilization Research: A broader definition

Now, before I proceed further, let me turn back to the research on evaluation utilization to see what further insights are provided. I have noted that the main body of literature in evaluation is replete with abundant testimonials and some empirical evidence of failure to utilize evaluation results. However, from among these continuing strains of non-utilization, there now seems to be emerging a new melody which points to instances in which evaluation information is in fact used. Moreover, these new results are not really contradictory with prior data on utilization; the evidence of utilization rests upon a broader definition of utilization and different categories of evaluation information. Let's explore the nature of this broader definition.

Carol Weiss's early writings (1972) stirred the profession's interest in the study of utilization, and forced us all to begin thinking more carefully about what we meant by utilization. More recently, Michael Patton's research (1975) has helped to focus attention on a broader conception of evaluation utilization -- one which focused on the actions and involvements of individual evaluators interacting with designated users. And, these interactions called to attention the gradual and subtle impact of evaluation -- not necessarily on major decisions but on slowly modifying attitudes and providing input for day to day program operations. Simply stated, utilization is not to be found in the application of externally devised evaluation standards,

but in the quest for data related to real concerns and interests of project administrators.

This broadened conception of evaluation utilization was evident also in my recent studies where my colleagues and I found a wide array of instances of evaluation utilization. And where such instances were evident, what was usually present was a user-oriented evaluator identifying, developing and nurturing an interest in evaluation with a small, finite set of local users. And furthermore, in instances in which utilization took place, a mechanism existed for on-going information dialogue (in place of one-time evaluation reporting) focused on questions of local concern.

These findings and their implications for providing evaluation technical assistance to local agencies are, perhaps, presaged by the final summary statement in Jane David's report (1978): "technical assistance must be redesigned to communicate a new view of the role of evaluation, and to develop skills such as generating one's own evaluation questions. As long as technical assistance is defined narrowly as a way of telling local staff how to improve the quality of their data, it will not increase local use of evaluations" (David; 1978, p. IX).

Specualtions on Evaluation Technical Assistance in Title I

And so, what might I speculate about potential areas of technical assistance based upon my understanding of evaluation utilization? First, don't spend an undue amount of time teaching local district personnel to implement the Title I models, the TIERS system and all the rest. In my opinion, this data is not likely to be utilized to any great extent at the local level for decision making purposes and certainly not for program modifications. To the extent that this information is necessary to have sound evaluation information for use at the federal level, it may be appropriate to engage in technical assistance in order to teach

people to collect the data. In fact, Robert Linn (1979) has suggested the possible use of alternative evaluation paradigms which would only require obtaining outcome data from a sample of school programs. It seems to me that providing instruction in order to have valid data at the federal level and presuming to provide instruction (or technical assistance) so that evaluation will have local impact are distinctly different topics.

Second, focus on evaluation as a process. As I have mentioned, my previous research shows that evaluation can have greater impact when evaluators: 1) work closely with a small group of users; and, 2) engage in dialogue with a carefully delineated and finite audience. Reports may be published, widely disseminated and hopefully read by a diverse audience, but evaluation as a process is dependent upon personal interactions. And, personal interactions are fostered by information dialogue, not information reporting (albeit readable, and timely) but on-going interactive communication sensitive to locally relevant questions. This focus on evaluation as a process is quite different from the usual focus on evaluation as a report. The implication in most federal programs is that evaluation is producing a written report or set of data describing the end of the year outcomes of a program.

Next, it seems to me that there is very little in the current Title I operational procedures which encourages local educational agencies to focus on evaluation directed to uniquely determined local needs and evaluation questions. Indeed, the current preoccupation with the TIERS system provides LEAs with just the opposite signals. Thus, it seems entirely appropriate at this time to encourage LEA's to focus on "generating one's own evaluation questions" as Jane David has said. Title I policy must not only condone such actions, but must provide incentives as well.

Specific Training Implications

The specific training implications of such a local-user-focused evaluation approach are enormous. I will present some initial thoughts on this matter. First, let me consider the TIERS data. While the technical assistance and training procedures should note that the information available from the Title I models might have some implication at the local level, training should emphasize that this data collection activity is primarily a means of obtaining accurate data for federal decision making. (Whether or not it even suffices for that purpose is yet another issue).

The focus of evaluation training must be shifted from "how can you use existing evaluation information in local decision making?" to "how can you gather evaluation information specifically relevant to locally determined decision concerns?" This change in orientation will require a great deal of desensitizing of local program officials who have come to believe that evaluation is a formal set of requirements imposed from outside the system.

It is naive to think of homogeneous fixed Title I programs operating in school districts. There are at best multiple programs but, more likely, a series of highly idiosyncratic program elements housed under a Title I umbrella. Picturing the school Title I program as such a non-static complex system implies the need for a different kind of evaluation. Such a system must be focused on clarifying local program operations, helping school personnel to understand the program they have implemented and the possibilities for change.

An on-going evaluation feedback system must, of necessity, deal with some seemingly pedestrian aspects of program operation; local information needs are frequently quite mundane. In answering local evaluation questions,

a broader range of information types become acceptable, simply because they are the best data available -- anecdotal data, literature search, interview data, surveys, observation data, etc. In short, guidelines must emphasize the imperfections of data collection in the field (indeed they must stress accomodation of these imperfections) while encouraging the most systematic data collection possible.

Finally, the technical assistance training must begin to focus on the evaluation process and on developing modes of evaluator-user interaction and dialogue. A focus on evaluation process requires the training of evaluators who above all have a sense of commitment to user oriented evaluation -- to the facilitation of program improvement. The development of evaluator attitudes towards service and the skills of productive interaction are perhaps together a ten year TAC training agenda.

I trust that these unholy views of Title I evaluation will encourage further discussion. I hope that a greater attention to the evaluation utilization implications of Title I evaluation will lead to major changes in the provision of technical assistance.

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